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Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General dated 11 August 1997 (A/51/946) in which he transmits the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "United Nations publications: enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates" (JIU/REP/97/2), as well as the note by the Secretary-General dated 17 November 1997 (A/52/685) containing his comments on the JIU report. During its consideration of both reports, the Committee met with the Inspectors, as well as representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification.

2. The Advisory Committee recalls that, in paragraph 83 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996–1997,[1] it recommended that JIU be requested to conduct a comprehensive survey of the role publications play in implementing mandates of intergovernmental bodies and the extent to which recurrent publications could be made more cost-effective. The request was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/206 C of 23 December 1995 and reiterated in resolution 51/211 B of 18 December 1996. The Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences considered several of the recommendations contained in the JIU report at its substantive session of 1997,[2] regretting the absence of the customary comments of the Secretary-General, which were not available at the time. The Assembly briefly took up the report during its fifty-second session, deciding in its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997 to postpone its consideration. The Committee for Programme and Coordination also considered the report during the first part of its thirty-eighth session,[3] along with the comments of the Secretary-General.

3. Under article 11 of the JIU statute, the Advisory Committee receives all its reports and makes comments and observations on them in accordance with its mandate. The Committee's comments and observations on the JIU report and on the Secretary-General's comments on that report, as well as its recommendations, are indicated below.

4. The Advisory Committee, first of all, commends JIU for the quality of its report. The Committee intends to inquire into the extent of the implementation of its own past recommendations on the subject, as well as those contained in the JIU report, as approved by the General Assembly, in the context of its examination of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001 and future bienniums.

Recommendation 1

5. The Advisory Committee notes that the objective of this recommendation is similar to those it made in paragraphs 73–83 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996–1997.[1] The Committee's related recommendations were endorsed by the

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General Assembly in its resolution 50/214 of 23 December 1995. Furthermore, as indicated in the context of the Committee's first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999,[4] a number of intergovernmental bodies, including the regional commissions, have been reviewing their publication programmes. Such reviews should continue to be conducted by the relevant intergovernmental bodies as a part of their reviews of the work programme. The Committee, therefore, is of the opinion that it is not necessary to include a special item on the agenda of substantive United Nations legislative bodies on publications, since such a procedure could result in theoretical discussions out of context.

6. The Advisory Committee welcomes the findings of the Inspectors with regard to avoiding duplication of documentation within the United Nations system. It notes the reservations voiced by the Secretary-General in paragraph 15 of his comments on the JIU report (A/52/685) with regard to the question of duplication of publications with organizations outside the United Nations system. However, the Committee sees considerable merit in the observations of the Inspectors contained in paragraph 23 of the JIU report. In that connection, however, the Inspectors pointed out that there were often international conferences in which various organizations outside and inside the United Nations system prepared a multiplicity of documents on the same subject. The Committee believes that unnecessary duplication of documentation could be identified during the preparatory process for such conferences.

Recommendation 2

7. The Advisory Committee notes the comments of the Secretary-General contained in paragraphs 17–19 of his report. The Committee welcomes this recommendation and was informed that a compendium of new and revised policy directives on publications was under preparation and would be issued during the first quarter of 1999.

Recommendation 3

8. The Advisory Committee welcomes the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit. It sees considerable merit in reviewing the current administrative, managerial and organizational structure of publishing activities in order to introduce necessary reforms at Headquarters. These could include the consolidation of a number of existing functions and units into a more centralized structure by taking into account, *inter alia*, requirements to streamline and accelerate the publishing process, bringing greater integration and coordination. The Committee requests the Secretary-General to indicate, in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001, what measures have been taken or will be taken to implement the recommendation of the Inspectors.

Recommendation 4

9. The Advisory Committee requests the Secretary-General to indicate, in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001, what steps have been taken to strengthen the Publications Board by reinforcing its mandates, working methods and practices in order to ensure that it provides effective overall control, oversight and coordination, in addition to policy guidance, on publishing activities, as recommended by JIU.

Recommendation 5

10. The Advisory Committee shares the view of the Secretary-General that mandates are an important basis for a large number of publications, specifically in the social and economic sector (A/52/685, para. 30). The Committee further agrees that departments have to retain some flexibility in their respective publications programmes. However, the Committee's experience indicates that there is merit in the Inspectors' recommendation. Publication programmes planned on the basis of general mandates often tend to be excessive and overly ambitious. The Inspectors, as well as the representatives of the Secretary-General, confirmed that there was often a lack of resources to edit, translate and process a large number of material produced under general mandates. Many manuscripts are therefore never published. The Committee considers this situation to be an example of a waste of professional resources that would be better applied to priority programmes.

11. However, the Advisory Committee is of the view that implementing the recommendation of the Inspectors without modification would introduce an element of rigidity. Therefore, the Committee recommends that publications proposed under general mandates be first reviewed by the related intergovernmental bodies in the context of their work programmes. Such work programmes should be considered in the manner recommended by the Committee, in particular in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996–1997.[1] Publications initiated after the

approval of the proposed programme budget should be governed by current procedures, including those contained in General Assembly resolution 41/213 of 19 December 1986.

Recommendation 6

12. The Secretary-General indicates, in paragraph 33 of his report, that this recommendation was a reflection of current procedure. The Advisory Committee, however, recommends that the present role of the Publications Board in the global administration of the funds in the external printing account and the management of publications be expanded to include oversight over the contents of publications. Such oversight could be carried out by empowering the Publications Board and its Working Committee to set overall standards and guidelines by which author departments would screen their publication proposals submitted to the Board.

Recommendation 7

13. The Inspectors informed the Advisory Committee that the objective of this recommendation was to have the full cost of publications administered under each department, including the cost of authorship. The Committee does not consider the implementation of this recommendation to be practical without the introduction of a cost-accounting system, which at this stage does not exist. The Committee's views on cost accounting for conference services are contained in its report of 16 October 1998 (A/53/507).

Recommendation 8

14. The Advisory Committee notes that the Secretary-General indicated in paragraph 36 of his report that this recommendation reflected current operating procedure. Accordingly, it should be implemented in the light of the comments made by the Committee on recommendation 5, indicated in paragraphs 10 and 11 above.

Recommendation 9

15. The Advisory Committee, as indicated in paragraph 11 above, is of the view that publications authorized by intergovernmental bodies after the adoption of the proposed programme budget should be governed by current financial and budgetary procedures, including those set out in General Assembly resolution 41/213. In the Committee's opinion, it is for the programme-formulating bodies themselves to review the frequency and duration of publications under their authority. Therefore, Secretariat units must draw the attention of those bodies to publications that are no longer relevant or are of lower priority. Under the circumstances, there is no need to adopt a "sunset rule". Moreover, the objective of sunset rules can be met by using current procedures whereby the Secretariat units concerned bring to the attention of intergovernmental bodies publications that need to be terminated, issued less frequently or merged with other publications. In that connection, the Committee recalls the provisions of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation[5] with regard to the identification of marginally useful, obsolete or ineffective activities. The Committee further recalls that many reports and publications have been terminated by intergovernmental bodies, especially the regional commissions, in the context of reform and restructuring, as reflected in the relevant sections of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999.

Recommendation 10

16. The Advisory Committee recommends that the Secretary-General indicate in the context of his proposed programme budget for 2000–2001 what action he has taken or intends to take in order to plan, in a more coordinated and integrated manner, the entire publishing process, once the publication or publication programme is approved by the General Assembly, as recommended by JIU.

Recommendation 11

17. The status of this recommendation should be governed by the Advisory Committee's views made with regard to recommendation 7 above and its report on cost accounting (A/53/507).

Recommendation 12

18. The Advisory Committee recommends that the Secretary-General indicate, in the context of his proposed programme budget for 2000–2001, what action he has taken or intends to take to implement this recommendation.

Recommendation 13

19. The Advisory Committee is of the view that it is not necessary to wait for the development of a cost-accounting system before implementing this recommendation on the question of an appropriate mode of printing. Secretariat units should always consider the most cost-effective mode of publishing and printing. The Committee was informed by the representative of the Secretary-General that current procedures for the use of the external printing account were too rigid, and that such rigidity often prevented the use of external printing funds for internal printing, which had proved to be more economical for the Organization. The Committee recommends that the Secretary-General, in the context of his budget proposals for the biennium 2000–2001, review the cost-effectiveness of internal and external printing modes, with a view to determining which would be the most cost-effective to expand, taking into account local conditions.

Recommendation 14

20. The implementation of this recommendation, related to the use of advanced technologies for publishing, including electronic publishing, should be reported by the Secretary-General in conjunction with the implementation of recommendation 13.

Recommendation 15

21. On the basis of the comments in paragraphs 66 and 67 of the JIU report, paragraphs 58–61 of the comments of the Secretary-General and the oral testimony of the Inspectors and representatives of the Secretary-General at the time of the hearings by the Advisory Committee, the Committee recommends the implementation of this recommendation. It is the view of the Committee that the proposal does not in any way infringe on the prerogatives of the intergovernmental bodies.

Recommendations 16 and 17

22. The Committee recommends that the Secretary-General indicate the effects of implementing these recommendations in the income sections of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001.

Recommendation 18

23. The Advisory Committee recommends, in the context of the proposed programme budget for the coming biennium, that the Secretary-General submit to the General Assembly, through the Committee, his proposals to implement this recommendation. In that regard, the Committee recalls its observations and recommendations on the use of income generated from optical disk system subscriptions, which should be applied directly to help meet the cost of maintaining and/or expanding the system (A/53/507, para. 13).

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fiftieth Session, Supplement No. 7* and corrigendum (A/50/7 and Corr.1)

[2] To be issued as *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-second Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/52/32/Rev.1)

[3] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/53/16), part one

[4] Ibid., *Fifty-second Session, Supplement No. 7* (A/52/7)

[5] ST/SGB/PPBME Rules/1 (1987), as amended by General Assembly resolution 42/215